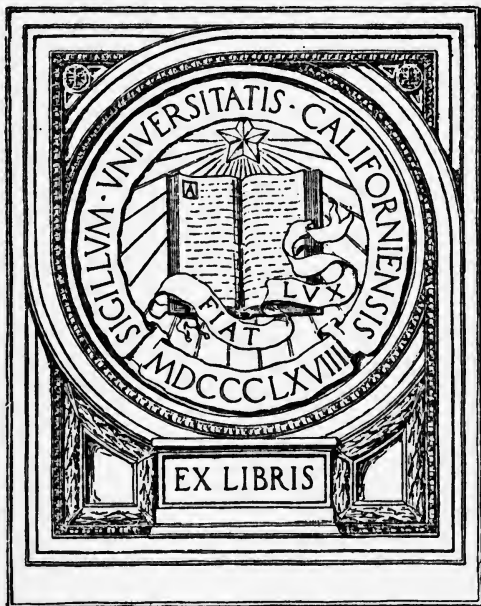


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With Sincere
Thanks for a
Delightful day.
Sada Wan

THE STATE FORBIDS

A Play in One Act

THE STATE FORBIDS

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

OWN OF
CALIFORNIA

BY

SADA COWAN



NEW YORK
MITCHELL KENNERLEY
1915

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PRINTED IN AMERICA

To
"BUNNY . . ."

Who has shared the
sunshine and the shadow with me.



CHARACTERS

MRS. NASH

HAROLD NASH

POOR LITTLE ONE

THE DISTRICT NURSE

DR. SPENCER

THE STATE FORBIDS

CHARACTERS

MRS. NASH.

HAROLD NASH.

POOR LITTLE ONE.

THE DISTRICT NURSE.

DOCTOR SPENCER.

SCENE: MRS. NASH's *one room dwelling . . . desolation. At the left of the barren room is a small cook stove. It is not far from the door leading into the hall, which is at the back of the room. On the opposite side is a bed in which a woman lies asleep. Not far from this, near the window, is a crude crib. The district nurse is preparing food near the oil cook-stove. She moves noiselessly. The door opens and HAROLD NASH, a ten-year-old boy,*

poorly clothed but well built and not under-nourished, bounces into the room.

HAROLD. Hello!

NURSE. [*Laying her finger on her lips and pointing to the sleeping figure.*] Sh . . . h . . . !

HAROLD. [*Lowering his voice.*] Oh! [*He slings down his cap.*] You the nurse?

NURSE. Yes. I suppose you're Harold.

HAROLD. Sure. [*He thrusts his hands into his pockets and shivers.*] Gee . . . but I'm glad to get back.

NURSE. [*Reprovingly.*] Don't talk so loud.

HAROLD. [*In low tones, glancing at his mother.*] Why did I have to stay away so long?

NURSE. Your mother was very sick. [*Busy.*] But four weeks isn't so terribly long.

HAROLD. You'd think it was if you had to stay at Porter's punk hole. [*A pause.*] Anything to eat?

NURSE. [*Stirring her cooking.*] There will be presently. Hungry?

HAROLD. Am I?

NURSE. [*Smiles.*] Just a few minutes. You don't seem very anxious to see your new brother.

HAROLD. [*Makes a wry face indicating his indifference.*]

NURSE. I thought all little boys liked to have a brother.

HAROLD. [*Lazily going towards the crib.*] Is that it?

NURSE. Don't wake him.

HAROLD. [*Tiptoes to the crib and stands a moment staring down. Then he returns to the nurse.*] Gee . . . ain't it ugly! Phew!

NURSE. All little babies are ugly.

HAROLD. [*Surprised.*] All got big heads like that?

NURSE. [*With meaning.*] Not just like that.

HAROLD. [*Shuddering.*] Ugh! Looks fierce! [*A pause.*] I'll bet it'll eat a lot. [*Confidentially, sitting on the edge of a box.*] Good thing my old man never saw him . . .

NURSE. [*Reprovingly.*] Do you mean your father, Harold?

HAROLD. Sure.

NURSE. Well, say "My father," then.

HAROLD. Not for MY old man.

NURSE. [*Smiles unwillingly.*]

HAROLD. [*Prattling.*] It's six months since the old man croaked . . .

NURSE. [*Reproachfully.*] Died, . . . Harold.

HAROLD. [*Meekly.*] Died. And . . . I'll tell you something, if you won't tell . . .

NURSE. I won't tell.

HAROLD. I don't believe Ma was any more sorry than me when he did kick out.

NURSE. [*As before.*] Harold!

HAROLD. Honest. He wasn't half good enough for her.

Everybody said so. And we was both awful scared of him when he was soused.

NURSE. Drunk!

HAROLD. Drunk. And he was drunk all the time. If you don't believe me, ask Doctor Spencer. He'll tell you.

NURSE. Doctor Spencer is very fond of you.

HAROLD. He ought to be. He told Doctor Harris he made his reputation on me at the hospital. So he ought to like me.

NURSE. You ought to like him. You'd have died if he hadn't pulled you through.

HAROLD. [*Confidentially.*] I was tellin' one of the boys about when I was a kid and he said kids was sick like me when their old man . . .

NURSE. [*Hastily.*] Never mind what the boy said. He probably didn't know anyway.

MRS. NASH. [*Stirs in her bed and stretches out her arms.*] Oh . . . h!

HAROLD. [*Going to the bedside.*] Hello, Ma. You sure can sleep.

MRS. NASH. [*Kissing him.*] Oh, Harold dear.

HAROLD. [*As though imparting news.*] The baby's awful ugly, ain't it?

MRS. NASH. Mother hasn't seen little brother yet. [*To the NURSE, imploringly.*] But to-day . . .

NURSE. As soon as the baby wakes up, Mrs. Nash.

MRS. NASH. You've been putting me off for days and days. Why can't I have my baby?

NURSE. It was for your own good and the child's good. You've been too ill.

MRS. NASH. Oh, I dread to see him. WHAT's the matter with him?

NURSE. [*Sharply.*] Matter with him? Why should there be anything?

MRS. NASH. I'm so afraid! I . . . [*Abruptly.*] Give him to me, please.

NURSE. [*More sharply.*] You don't want me to wake him, do you?

MRS. NASH. No, I suppose not.

[*There is a knock on the door, an immediate opening, and DOCTOR SPENCER enters. He is young, tall and business like. A man of mind but of conventional training.*]

DOCTOR. Good morning.

NURSE. Good morning. [*She leaves her cooking, turns down the light, and comes to the bed, where she stands.*]

DOCTOR. [*Taking HAROLD's hand.*] Hello, my boy! Glad to see you. [*He lays his hat on the table.*]

HAROLD. [*Very respectfully, for him.*] Same to you, Doctor Spencer.

DOCTOR. [*Smiling.*] What do you say to the little present I brought you? [*He goes to the bedside and feels the patient's pulse.*]

HAROLD. [*Hangs his head somewhat sulkily.*]

NURSE. He hasn't seemed over pleased.

DOCTOR. [*Returns to HAROLD and pats his head.*] Run outside . . . there's a good fellow. I'll be here only a few moments. Then you can come back.

HAROLD. Yes, sir. Will you whistle when you go?

DOCTOR. Sure I will.

HAROLD. [*Going.*] Thanks. [*In the doorway he pauses.*] I don't want you to think I'm ungrateful, but being a friend of mine [*with an indication towards the crib*] . . . you might have dropped something better looking than that into the house. [*He goes.*]

DOCTOR. [*Now sits beside the bed. He addresses the NURSE significantly.*] Mrs. Nash hasn't seen her baby yet?

NURSE. No.

DOCTOR. Um!

NURSE. I thought you'd better be here.

MRS. NASH. Doctor . . . I WANT my baby.

DOCTOR. Of course you do and you shall have it. But tell me first, how you are? How have you slept?

MRS. NASH. Just now I slept and I dreamed of my baby. He was big and beautiful and strong. Oh, I was proud of him.

DOCTOR. [*Cheerfully.*] The sort of man Harold is going to be.

MRS. NASH. I hope so. And the Little One . . . [*Pleadingly; she is fearful of the answer.*] The Little One, too?

DOCTOR. [*Gravely, somewhat hesitantly.*] The Little One may not be quite so big and strong.

MRS. NASH. [*Sitting up in bed.*] Why? What do you mean?

DOCTOR. He's not strong.

MRS. NASH. [*In terror.*] But that's all . . . he's just not strong . . . ? There's nothing really the matter with him?

DOCTOR. Nothing to be alarmed about. But he looks a little strange just now. So I want to warn you before you see him.

MRS. NASH. [*Unconvinced by the tone.*] What's wrong with him, Doctor? Tell me.

DOCTOR. He may be somewhat of an invalid, Mrs. Nash.

MRS. NASH. [*Agonizing.*] Oh, tell me . . . tell me. Is he crippled or maimed? Oh, don't try to spare me. Tell me.

DOCTOR. Be quiet. Or I can't tell you.

MRS. NASH. What is it? Is he blind? Or deaf or deformed?

DOCTOR. He's not blind or deaf or deformed . . . that is — not bodily.

MRS. NASH. [*With horror in her face.*] You mean . . . ?

DOCTOR. His mind. He won't be just like other children. You'll have to be very tender and patient with him. He'll need all the love you can give him.

MRS. NASH. [*Dully.*] His mind . . . ! Oh, you don't mean he's a . . .

DOCTOR. [*Gently.*] He is everything you fear. Just a

little helpless mass of life. That's all he can ever be. [*Rising.*] Now you know.

MRS. NASH. [*Stunned, stares before her. Then she lets out a short sharp scream.*]

NURSE. Oh, Doctor, ought you to have told her?

DOCTOR. [*Laying his hand firmly on MRS. NASH's shoulder.*] She's got to know sometime. She's got to face it.

MRS. NASH. [*Dully.*] An idiot! My baby! [*Sobs choke her. She turns to the DOCTOR.*] Oh, perhaps it isn't as bad as you think. Harold was weak and sick and . . . [*Her voice hardens.*] No. Harold was born ten years before.

DOCTOR. [*Does not answer, but pats her shoulder tenderly, waiting for her to grow quiet.*]

MRS. NASH. [*Harshly.*] I heard a woman once talk just as I am talking. Only they lied to her. They said her baby could be cured. I looked at that child. [*She shudders.*] Ugh! I shall never forget . . . the lolling big head, the . . .

DOCTOR. Sh . . . h! This won't do you any good.

MRS. NASH. [*As in a trance.*] A child of a drunkard . . .

a degenerate . . . Just a Poor Little One . . . [*an instant's pause*] . . . like — Mine. [*Presently the dull stoniness of emotion passes and she turns hysterically to the physician.*] Don't let it grow up to suffer, Doctor. Don't let it live in hell. It doesn't know anything now. It's no use to itself. It's no use to any one on earth. Oh, Doctor, kill it! That's the kind thing. That's humane. There's no harm. It's no more than throwing away a flower.

DOCTOR. Sh . . . h! Be quiet please. You'll work yourself into a fever.

MRS. NASH. [*Clinging to him; hysterically.*] Kill it, Doctor . . . kill it! Don't let it live. Oh, why won't you end its suffering? Why?

DOCTOR. I CAN'T TAKE LIFE. That's impossible. Crippled, diseased, imbecile, whatever it is, it is life and I can't take it.

MRS. NASH. It's my child. I bore it.

DOCTOR. The child has a right to live.

MRS. NASH. To live — yes. But THIS isn't life. It will

even never know it's alive. It will just stare and stare and know nothing. But I'll know it's alive. I'll have to watch it day by day and know that it's my fault. I did it. I can't, I tell you. I can't. It's a sin . . . a crime. I won't let it live. I . . .

DOCTOR. Mrs. Nash, you must be quiet.

MRS. NASH. [*As before.*] Kill it, Doctor. It wouldn't want to live if it could choose. You'd shoot a suffering dog. You'd kill a horse you loved rather than see it suffer. But my baby, a little human soul, you won't put out of torture. Well, I LOVE it. Do you know what that means? [*She peers into his face fanatically.*] If you won't kill it, I will.

DOCTOR. [*Matter of fact.*] Nonsense, Mrs. Nash. You don't realize what you are saying.

MRS. NASH. [*Excitedly.*] I love it, I tell you. I bore it, dreamed for it, prayed for it. After I knew that it must come . . . Oh, how I prayed that it should be beautiful and strong. It should have all in life I had missed and now . . . [*She breaks down.*] Oh, my God! [*A pause in which she sobs.*] I won't do this thing, I tell you. I won't commit this

crime. It didn't want to come. It didn't ask to come. It shouldn't have come. [*Resolutely.*] And it sha'n't stay.

DOCTOR. [*Taking her hand.*] Mrs. Nash, please, control yourself.

MRS. NASH. [*Bursts into a hysterical fit of sobbing. The DOCTOR rises to allow her to grow quieter. The NURSE steps forward to him.*]

DOCTOR. I have told her too soon. A little bromide at once. [*He opens his bag and gives the medicine to the NURSE. Both DOCTOR and NURSE stand back to the woman.*]

MRS. NASH. [*Slips out of bed, a pillow in her hand, which she is almost too weak to hold. Feebly she totters towards the crib. Without looking at the infant, turning her face away so that she may not see what she is doing, she rams the pillow down upon the child and holds it there. Then a moan escapes her and she totters, saves herself from falling by clutching at the crib. Still she looks persistently away. The DOCTOR and NURSE hear her and rush towards her. Again summoning all her strength MRS. NASH presses the pillow down upon the child and holds it firmly, while she faces*

the DOCTOR and NURSE, as an entrapped animal, about to spring.] It sha'n't live, I tell you!

DOCTOR. [*Takes her arm. With the little strength she has left she struggles with him.*] You'll hurt yourself. I'm stronger than you are.

[The NURSE has lifted the pillow from the baby and fans the child with a bit of paper. She raises its head, bending over the crib.]

DOCTOR. Think what you're doing. This would be murder.

MRS. NASH. [*Standing still; dully, as though turned to stone.*] Murder? No. Love — pity — compassion!

DOCTOR. [*Leading her towards the bed.*] The State wouldn't see it your way, I'm afraid. You'd have a big price to pay.

MRS. NASH. [*Intensely.*] I'd be willing.

NURSE. [*Comes and arranges her in bed.*]

DOCTOR. [*Sits near her again.*]

MRS. NASH. [*Falls back upon her pillows exhausted. But after an instant she sits up and leans towards him. She is intensely wrought up and excited.*] I oughtn't to have borne that child. You knew it . . .

DOCTOR. I warned you when Harold came not to have another baby.

MRS. NASH. [*Bitterly.*] You warned me! But how?

DOCTOR. I told you . . .

MRS. NASH. [*Passionately.*] You DIDN'T tell me. You hinted! You gave me vague advice that left me as blind as I was before.

DOCTOR. You are ungrateful. I told you all I dared. It is against the law to tell a woman ways and means to prevent conception. Perhaps you didn't know this. But it is against the law.

MRS. NASH. For ten years I chanced not to have a child. It wasn't my wisdom or your help that kept me from it. And then — then when this happened and I knew, I came to you

and begged you . . . begged you on my knees . . . to help me. But you wouldn't.

DOCTOR. I couldn't help you.

MRS. NASH. [*Savagely.*] You wouldn't.

DOCTOR. It would have been criminal.

MRS. NASH. [*Pointing to the crib.*] More criminal than — that?

DOCTOR. You asked an impossible thing. I only did my duty. No decent doctor would risk his career and face the criminal court to do the thing you wanted.

MRS. NASH. Oh, how you tortured me that day with all you told me. My heart ached for the little unborn thing. You stood there and saw. You saw the hell open before it . . . the life-long torture. But you wouldn't help.

DOCTOR. [*Gently.*] The State forbids such things, Mrs. Nash. It's taking life. Even unborn life is life, you know.

MRS. NASH. [*Harshly, indicating the child.*] I don't call THAT life.

DOCTOR. You shouldn't be unreasonable. I can't go against the State. [*Now he includes the NURSE by an occasional glance.*] Perhaps it isn't right or just when women need us doctors; and God knows, they do need us. But what can we do? Our hands are tied.

MRS. NASH. [*Agonizing, rocks to and fro.*]

DOCTOR. Personally I think a doctor should have as much say over life and death as a judge has. It would save a lot of misery. But that isn't the law. And we are helpless. [*He glances at the NURSE.*] You know I firmly believe in educating women to have only as many children as they can properly care for; as many as their strength permits [*to Mrs. NASH*] and in a case like yours — none. But as I say, the State . . .

MRS. NASH. [*Vehemently.*] Oh, I know! I've seen it time and again. The mothers don't count. The babies don't count. It doesn't matter whether they're fed or clothed or happy. They grow up into men and women somehow. And that's all the State cares. Tools . . . ! Just so many tools. It won't ever help when it ought to. It wouldn't help me. It wouldn't let you help me. [*She sobs while she*

talks.] It made me have that baby even after I knew that it might be born cursed. [*Hard.*] But I've fooled them this time. That's a useless tool . . . it's no good to them. An idiot. [*Breaking down.*] My baby! Oh, my God!

[*While she is hysterically sobbing, the NURSE takes up the baby and brings it to her. It is held so that no one but the mother looks upon it. For an instant she turns her face from it.*]

MRS. NASH. Take it away. I don't want to see it. I don't ever want to see it. [*Presently she looks, first with horror and covers her eyes with her hands.*] Ugh! [*Then she looks again and gazes fascinated. Now overcome with pity she opens her arms.*] My baby! Poor little one! Poor little beggar! [*The NURSE gives her the child, she holds it to her and kisses it passionately.*]

DOCTOR. [*To the NURSE.*] She's all right now. She won't hurt it. [*He takes up his hat.*] I'll drop in later. Good-bye. [*He goes. An instant later a whistle is heard outside.*]

MRS. NASH. [*Lies back with her baby in her arms.*]

HAROLD. [*Enters.*] I'm awful hungry. [*He walks to the*

bed and watches the pair. Then he shrugs his shoulders, thrusts his hands contemptuously into his pockets, commences to whistle and walks to the window.] I'm glad you've got something else to hug except me.

NURSE. [*Busy at the cook stove.*] Don't you like to be hugged.

HAROLD. [*Looking out the window.*] Naw. I'm too big. He'll be big some day, then he won't want to be hugged neither.

NURSE. [*Shudders at the suggestion.*]

HAROLD. [*Turns and watches the child, contemptuously.*] He's fierce! I'll never like him.

NURSE. [*Dishes some soup and puts it on the table.*]

HAROLD. [*At once forgets mother and child and commences to eat rapidly.*]

THE CURTAIN IS LOWERED

It is now ten years later.

The room is a trifle less poverty stricken. The cook-stove has gone. There is also an inner room.

MRS. NASH *is sewing. At her feet POOR LITTLE ONE, a large overgrown boy, is discovered facing the window at the back of the room.* He is playing with toys. Now he raises his hands, high above his head, clasps them together and bursts out laughing. MRS. NASH shrinks slightly, as she always does at the sound of his senseless laughter. It lasts but a moment. Then in silence he continues to play.*

MRS. NASH. [*For a second stares at him broodingly, then continues to sew.*]

HAROLD. [*A handsome lad of twenty, manly and well set up, enters. He kisses his mother and tosses a bag to the child.*] Here, Little One — catch! [*The child makes no attempt to catch and the bag falls to the floor.*]

* The face of the idiot child, as baby or later, is never seen by the audience.

MRS. NASH. [*Sadly.*] It's no use, Harold. You can't teach him.

HAROLD. Well, I'm not going to give up trying yet.

MRS. NASH. Doctor Spencer says you might as well make up your mind to it.

HAROLD. He doesn't know everything. Something might happen.

MRS. NASH. After ten years? [*Smiling sadly.*] I'm afraid not.

HAROLD. [*Opens the bag and takes out a candy which he places in the child's mouth.*] Here . . . open your mouth. [*Then he turns to his mother and sits near her.*] Has Mrs. Walker heard from Ralph?

MRS. NASH. No. It's very strange. I'm afraid it means bad news.

HAROLD. The boys at the front are having a rotten time of it. Especially the green ones. They save all the talent and push the youngsters right on to the firing line. Devilish thing, this war!

MRS. NASH. Thank God, you didn't enlist when Ralph Walker did. I think it would have killed me, Harold.

HAROLD. Don't worry about my enlisting. Nothing could make me. [*Angrily.*] Not even that hussy who called me — a coward!

MRS. NASH. Who dared to call you a coward?

HAROLD. Oh, never mind.

MRS. NASH. It's the cowards who enlist. It takes courage to stay at home.

HAROLD. You're right, Mother, it does. We could have avoided this war if we'd wanted to. We're as much to blame as the other side.

MRS. NASH. You'll keep out of it, Harold? No matter what happens?

HAROLD. I've no desire, Mother, to go out and kill fellows, just young fellows like I am. Yes. I'll keep out of it — if I can.

MRS. NASH. My heart aches for every suffering mother in the world.

HAROLD. It's tough.

MRS. NASH. [*Reflectively.*] Curious, isn't it? There's just one world, one mass of human beings together. Probably just one flag in the sight of God and yet . . . [*She breaks off abruptly.*] Let's not talk about it, dear. It makes me sad.

HAROLD. We've got to talk about it, Mother. It may strike home.

MRS. NASH. [*Alarmed.*] What do you mean?

HAROLD. We have exhausted our volunteers. Now a conscription order has been issued.

MRS. NASH. I don't understand. I don't know anything about such things. Is that the law?

HAROLD. No. But in war times they make new laws. Each State is obliged to provide a certain number of men. Men who have to serve whether they want to or not. Their names are chosen, placed in a hat, all jumbled up together and drawn . . . [*he smiles*] . . . just as you would draw a lottery ticket. My name has gone into the hat, Mother. Down at the court house they are drawing now.

MRS. NASH. Harold!

HAROLD. Such a crowd you never saw. Doctor Stevens is working his head off. He's surgeon general and has got charge of the entire recruiting.

MRS. NASH. [*Terrorized.*] Your name's not in, Harold . . . Oh, not your name!

HAROLD. [*Lightly.*] Yes . . . along with the rest . . . a whole load of men. There isn't a ghost of a chance that I'll be conscripted but . . .

MRS. NASH. No, Harold, no. I couldn't bear it. You're all I've got. You're all my life, my happiness.

HAROLD. [*Kissing her.*] Why, Mother, what a baby you are. Anybody would think I were already chosen.

MRS. NASH. If you should be chosen, MUST you go?

HAROLD. There's no free will about it, Mother. The State orders. You know what that means.

MRS. NASH. [*With a long glance at POOR LITTLE ONE.*] The State! [*Bitterly.*] Sometimes I almost hate the State.

HAROLD. [*Pats her hand.*] There is one way out of conscription.

MRS. NASH. Tell me.

HAROLD. If a man is chosen, he can pay a certain sum of money . . . I'm not sure of the amount, and the State will provide a substitute.

MRS. NASH. That's some comfort.

HAROLD. So even if I'm unlucky enough to be conscripted, we have one hope left.

MRS. NASH. And you sha'n't go. Not if it beggars us to keep you here.

DOCTOR SPENCER. [*Knocks on the door. HAROLD opens it.*] May I come in?

MRS. NASH. Yes, indeed.

HAROLD. Hello, Doctor . . . come right in. Sit down.

DOCTOR. [*Sitting.*] I heard such a sobbing in the hall as I came up the stairs. I wonder what is wrong.

MRS. NASH. [*Rising.*] Oh, perhaps Mrs. Walker has

heard something from her son. I'd better see. I won't be a minute.

DOCTOR. [*Rising.*] If I can be of any help . . .

MRS. NASH. [*Going.*] I'll call you.

DOCTOR. [*When he is alone with the boy.*] I've got bad news for you, Harold.

HAROLD. Out with it!

DOCTOR. [*Looks at him.*]

HAROLD. Called . . . eh?

DOCTOR. Yes. Called. Come with me now and register.

HAROLD. I'm not going, Doctor.

DOCTOR. You must, my boy. I'm here officially. You must register within an hour, or it means arrest.

HAROLD. I don't believe in conscription. I won't be forced to murder.

DOCTOR. My dear boy, nobody believes in conscription theoretically. When war breaks out it becomes a necessity. Be a man. Your country needs you.

HAROLD. [*Matter of fact, not sentimentally.*] Doctor, my mother needs me.

DOCTOR. She'll get on. Other women do.

HAROLD. I don't see how.

DOCTOR. [*Laying his hand on HAROLD's shoulder.*] If each fellow stopped to think of the woman who needed him, how do you think we could carry on a war?

HAROLD. A pity he doesn't think then.

DOCTOR. [*Urging him.*] You mustn't consider individuals, Old Fellow.

HAROLD. [*Hotly.*] No one ever has considered individuals. That's been most of our trouble.

DOCTOR. [*Pleasantly.*] I'm not a Socialist or Anarchist or any other kind of an Ist.

HAROLD. [*Excitedly.*] Oh, yes you are. A Jingoist.

DOCTOR. [*Laughs.*]

HAROLD. [*As before.*] Your views and mine are different, Doctor. I've been poor and you haven't. That may account for it. But sometimes when you've talked patriotism and glory up to me — you know how I mean — I've had hard work to remember that you're my best friend; Mother's best friend.

DOCTOR. I've only tried to make you feel what every man ought to feel for his country.

HAROLD. The State has got you hypnotized. But it hasn't got me and it won't get me. I won't fight in a war I had no voice in declaring. I won't fight for a wrong principle. I won't shoot my own brothers . . . that's all there is to it.

DOCTOR. [*Gently.*] Harold, you aren't standing on a soap box and this isn't a street corner. This is just between friends. [*Again laying his hand on HAROLD's arm.*] My dear boy, no one is asking you to volunteer. This is conscription. You've got to go.

HAROLD. [*Turning to him, fiercely.*] And you call this a free country? [*With a short contemptuous laugh.*]

DOCTOR. War changes everything.

HAROLD. [*Ignoring the answer, in the same manner as before.*] What's free about this country? Who's free in it? Are you? Am I? Can you use your profession as you want to? Can you use your judgment and your knowledge of life? [*Hotly.*] No. Of course you can't. Can I use my strength, my energy as I want to? No. I've got to use it — to kill. The State stuffs us full of patriotism and loyalty until we forget every decent instinct in us. Love, generosity, pity — everything goes but hate. We're turned into fighting beasts. That's all we are.

DOCTOR. [*Protests dumbly.*]

HAROLD. And then the hypocrisy of it! Why doesn't the State say "Get out and murder!" "Let's all be beasts!" "Get out and kill!" Oh, it can't get me with its talk of patriotism. No, by God, it can't get me.

DOCTOR. Be sensible, my boy. What will you do?

HAROLD. Pay, of course. I'll pay their dirty money.

DOCTOR. Then you'll send a substitute? You're not going?

HAROLD. No. I'm not going.

[*The door opens and MRS. NASH enters, very frightened and white.*]

MRS. NASH. [*Very softly.*] She's heard, Harold. Ralph has been — killed. [*She covers her eyes with her hands.*]

HAROLD. [*Starts.*]

DOCTOR. Oh, the poor woman. I'll go in to her. The first door to the left, isn't it?

MRS. NASH. [*Nods.*]

DOCTOR. [*Goes.*]

HAROLD. [*Stands staring before him.*]

MRS. NASH. Terrible, my boy, isn't it?

HAROLD. [*As before.*] Killed!

MRS. NASH. [*Putting her arm about him.*] Thank God . . . oh, thank God . . . you aren't out there.

HAROLD. [*Draws a little away from her.*] Don't, Mother.

MRS. NASH. What is it, my boy? What is it?

HAROLD. [*Does not answer.*]

MRS. NASH. What's troubling you, Harold? What is it, dear? Don't keep anything back from your mother. [*She waits an instant.*] Of course if you don't want to tell me . . . you don't have to.

HAROLD. I do have to. I wish I didn't.

MRS. NASH. You frighten me. What is it? Something Doctor Spencer has said?

HAROLD. [*Nods.*]

MRS. NASH. [*Not too tragically.*] You're conscripted?

HAROLD. Yes.

MRS. NASH. But you're not . . .

HAROLD. I'm called [*a pause—then resolutely*] and I'm going.

MRS. NASH. [*Completely changed.*] Harold!

HAROLD. I've got to register at once — now.

MRS. NASH. You promised me even if you were called . . .

HAROLD. To pay a price and send another man.

MRS. NASH. [*Clinging to him.*] Yes, dear, yes.

HAROLD. [*Staring ahead of him.*] You can't pay for life with money.

MRS. NASH. But you said . . .

HAROLD. I didn't understand until you came back from in — there.

MRS. NASH. Oh, my boy . . . no! . . . no!

HAROLD. I'm trying to do what's right.

MRS. NASH. I need you.

HAROLD. The man I'd send in my place probably has a mother.

MRS. NASH. [*Breaking down.*] Oh, Harold dear.

HAROLD. [*Soothing her.*] There, Mother dear, don't cry, don't.

DOCTOR. [*Knocks, opens the door and enters.*] Poor woman. She's better alone.

MRS. NASH. Oh, Doctor, talk to him! Tell him not to go. I couldn't bear it. He'll listen to you. He always has.

DOCTOR. [*Genuinely surprised.*] Is he going? I thought that . . .

MRS. NASH. [*Fiercely.*] Don't you know that he's going? Didn't you come to get him? Aren't you trying to drag him away from me? Oh, Harold, my son, listen to me.

HAROLD. [*Stands staring and thinking.*]

MRS. NASH. They'll push you to the front, food for bullets; they always do with the green ones. You told me they do. They did with her boy. [*For an instant she is overcome at the thought.*] Harold, listen.

HAROLD. [*Taking her in his arms.*] Mother dear, please, I must go. I —

MRS. NASH. [*Turning away.*] Help me, Doctor. Talk to him.

HAROLD. [*Soothingly.*] Hush, dearie. You're making too much of it. To-day I'm only going to sign . . .

MRS. NASH. And then you'll go to the front. They're all going. Oh, I know. Oh, Doctor . . . help me.

DOCTOR. I'm as powerless as you are.

MRS. NASH. [*Turning on him savagely.*] Why did you come here? Why did you tell him?

DOCTOR. It was my duty.

MRS. NASH. [*Bitterly.*] Once before I heard you quote your duty, when like a coward you wouldn't give me help. [*With a glance at the idiot child.*] You could have spared that child from being born. But you wouldn't spare it.

DOCTOR. I couldn't. You are blaming me for things beyond my control. I didn't make the laws.

MRS. NASH. [*Excitedly and spontaneously.*] The State won't let us women help ourselves. We must have children whether we want them or not. And then the State comes

and takes them from us. It doesn't ask. It commands. We've got to give them up. [*Shrilly.*] I've got to give my boy. [*Again bitterly.*] What are we, we women? Just cattle! Breeding animals . . . without a voice! Dumb — powerless! [*An instant's pause, then in intense rebellion.*] Oh, the State! The State commands! And the State forbids! Damn the State!

HAROLD. Mother!

DOCTOR. I wish that I need not have been the bearer of this message.

MRS. NASH. Years ago you wouldn't help me to end the suffering of an innocent soul. You wouldn't even turn your back while a THING went out into the darkness. But now you come to take him from me. You'd take the boy I've watched grow big and strong . . . a man . . . and you'd leave THAT. [*Points to the child.*]

DOCTOR. Dear woman, what can I do?

MRS. NASH. You said to put that child out of the way would be murder. The State would call it murder. Well . . . what's this? Tell me. Isn't this murder? Isn't this

life you are taking? [*Savagely.*] Oh, I hate you. I have hated you for ten long years. But I never knew how much until to-day.

DOCTOR. [*Gently.*] You are unstrung. You don't mean what you are saying.

HAROLD. No, Doctor, of course she doesn't. [*Protesting.*] Mother dear . . . [*He comes and puts his arms about her.*]

MRS. NASH. [*Clings to him desperately and caresses him.*]

DOCTOR. [*Looking at his watch.*] Sorry, my boy, but time's almost up.

HAROLD. [*Gently putting his mother aside.*] I'm ready.

MRS. NASH. [*Clinging.*] No, Harold . . . no . . .

HAROLD. Let me go, dear.

[*The two men start for the door.*]

MRS. NASH. [*In a changed tone, brokenly and appealingly.*] You . . . Doctor . . . You can't take him!

DOCTOR. [*Pauses and turns.*]

MRS. NASH. [*Begging.*] Don't you remember what you said? [*Pointing to POOR LITTLE ONE.*] That . . . "That's life. Crippled, imbecile, whatever it is, it is life and I can't take it." You said even an unborn thing is life. Oh, you won't, Doctor . . . now. You won't. You can't.

HAROLD. [*Pushes the DOCTOR out the door. They go.*]

MRS. NASH. [*Following to the doorway.*] This is life you are taking! [*She screams.*] Harold! [*She walks back into the room and tries to collect herself, pressing her hands tight to her throbbing temples.*] It's murder! Murder! [*For a second she stands irresolute, then falls face forward across the table sobbing violently. At the sound the idiot child raises its two hands above its head, claps them together and bursts into a senseless piercing shriek of laughter.*]

CURTAIN

THE END



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